



Remarks delivered by Wintley Phipps at the National Truancy Prevention

Conference

It is an honor and privilege to be with you today. My name is Wintley Phipps, as you heard, and at the age of 14 years old I woke up one morning talking like this. It really messed up my father, if you can imagine a 14-year-old kid waking up and saying, “Hey, Dad. How’s it goin’?”

To tell you a little bit about myself, my dreams turned to music. I confess I wanted to be another Sly Stone. But I met Sly and he *was* stoned, so I said, “Something is wrong with this picture—my hero is incoherent.” Then I wanted to be like another musical hero, and he was a man who sounded like a man. I’d go around the house singing, “It’s not unusual . . .” I wanted to be Tom Jones so bad. But then I met Tom Jones, and he wasn’t happy, and I decided very early in my life that fame does not equal happiness. Look at all the divas in the world today.

Well, I came here today to do a little bit of talking, and I promised I would do a song or two. I’m going to try and fit that all in. I won’t speak too long because I learned a long time ago that for a message to be immortal it doesn’t have to be eternal. It reminds me of one of my heroes of history, Sir Winston Churchill. He was receiving an honorary

doctorate from Yale, and when it came time for the first recipient to receive his doctorate, he got up and spoke for an hour and a half on the acronym “Yale.” What the “Y” stood for and what the “A” stood for and so on. When it came time for Sir Winston Churchill to receive his, he got up and said he was never so glad to hear the words of the previous speaker and was never so glad to receive his doctorate from Yale and not from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. So I’m not going to speak long, I promise. And I won’t use a lot of big words, either.

I live in Florida, and we were there during some of that rough weather, the hurricanes, that came through, and it was so wonderful to see this old gentleman that CNN put a microphone in the face of to ask what it was like to be in a hurricane. When he saw that microphone in his face, he realized he was on national television and he had to bring his vocabulary up a notch or two. When they asked him what it was like, he said, “They told us we had to leave, so we had to evaporate.” So I’m not going to fish for any big words today. But very succinctly, there is no place I would rather be this morning than right here with you. We used to have a saying in college that “There is no place like this place, so this must be the place.”

I want to talk to you, first of all, that I’ve been incredibly blessed in my life. My resume is strangely eclectic. You’ll see “Billy Graham Crusades” and “Saturday Night Live.” You’ll see “Hour of Power” and “Soul Train.” I was the first gospel artist on “Soul Train.” A man came to me and wanted me to sing a song on “Soul Train.” He called up Don Cornelius, the host (I guess you all don’t know what “Soul Train” is), and Don

Cornelius said he couldn't put anything religious on "Soul Train." Music builds the very young people who need to hear it. Cornelius said he couldn't do it. The man said, "Listen Don, my name is George Johnson of Johnson Products Company, you know, ultra-sheen afro-sheen, and my corporation has been backing your show for 8 years." Next thing I knew, I was the first gospel singer on "Soul Train."

But those aren't the greatest accomplishments in my life. I was the only soloist at Diana Ross's wedding in Switzerland. I had the privilege of being in the crowd to welcome Nelson Mandela when he was released from prison. I was the last one to sing "Amazing Grace" for Mother Teresa before she died. Those aren't the greatest accomplishments in my life. The greatest accomplishment in my life is that this black man, with the help of God, has provided nurture for three African American sons and has worked with all his heart to make their mother the most supremely happy woman in the world. Last August, we celebrated 28 years of marriage, and I told her if she ever leaves me, I'm going with her.

For those who are here today who work to advance the mission of helping children who are prone to truancy to build brighter futures—don't lose the light that shines in your eyes. That light of hope. That light of perennial optimism. It is a light that illuminates your countenance, and when a child comes into your presence, they look for that light. We who are here today are bound together by a shared delight, the inexpressible joy of watching children succeed. There are those who sit around bemoaning the predicament of our society, and they rehearse the grim details of the dilemmas that children face today.

But we are here today because we have chosen to be proactive. To be creative. It is my honor to be here with you and to stand along side of you who share this passion to assist children and equip children to live out their potential. We at the Dream Academy believe that a child with a dream is a child with a future. I will work and spend the rest of my life to battle with forces that seek to crush the dreams of our children.

In 1987, I took my son, who was 7 years old, on a school trip to the steps of the Capitol to hear President Reagan give a speech. When we returned home, we were watching the news coverage of the event that we had just attended. I said to my son, “Hey, we were just there!” I don’t know what possessed me, but I turned to him and said, “Son, you know, you could be President one day.” He said, “Oh no, Daddy.” “Why do you say that?” I asked. He said, “Daddy, don’t you know?” “Son, don’t I know what?” I replied. And with an assurance born of his brief 7 years of life, he said to me with all the confidence a 7-year-old could muster, “Daddy, you got to be white to be President.” Nobody had ever told him that. No white person had ever sat down to try and poison his mind. No one had ever tried to rid him of his self-esteem and self-worth. But my son of 7 years old had already seen that in this land there are giants, and all the signals he was picking up was telling him that he had to be white to be President. As Dr. King said already, I began to see what Dr. King called “the dark clouds of inferiority” filling his mental sky.

Years ago, I spent some time in Hong Kong, and there is a Chinese tattoo artist there who has tattoos displayed in the window. One said “Born to lose.” “Does anyone ever ask for

such a terrible message to be on their body?” someone asked. The Chinese man said stoically, “Before tattoo on body, tattoo on mind.”

Many of our children today believe very early that they are born to lose. They’ve convinced themselves. When my son said what he said, it came home to me that right here in America, many of our boys and girls, even those from homes of privilege searching for their sense of identity, are identifying with what I call this degenerate hip-hop culture, or the degenerate parts of this hip-hop culture. Many children from homes of privilege feel like they are born to lose. What they’re really telling us is they see giants; they know the great cities upon which their fortunes are built are well-fortified and the halls of government are bastions of preference and bias. They don’t think they have a fair shot. Everywhere they look, they are constantly being reminded of this. As we build our defenses in this country, may we never forget that, as one writer said, “An educated populous is our greatest defense.”

We are trying to socially engineer a response to very profound questions in this country. Can a nation as powerful as America build a prosperous society on a foundation of an undereducated populous?

Many years ago in New York City, they noticed a disturbing crack appear on the 42nd floor of a high-rise apartment building. The company that owned the building sent for the architect to investigate. He arrived, the building manager heard he was in the building, and the manager took the elevator up to the 42nd floor to try and find him. He couldn’t

find him. Someone told him that he was in the 6th basement, so he took the elevator down and found the architect. “What are you doing down here,” he asked. The architect replied, “Sir, you may have a crack on the 42nd floor, but your problem isn’t on the 42nd floor. Your problem is down here in the basement.” As it turned out, a security guard employed in the building wanted to build a garage onto his house and didn’t have the money. So every evening before leaving work, he would take the elevator to the 6th basement and chisel out a brick, put it in his bag, and take it home. And after 5 years of doing that, a crack appeared on the 42nd floor.

When we look at children dropping out, being truant, we are looking at the problem on the 42nd floor, but the problem is not on the 42nd floor. It’s at the foundation. The foundation of faith, of family, of education; and all the hard evidence suggests to us that equal opportunity without equal preparation means nothing. And equal preparation is not possible where there isn’t equal access to excellence in instruction. Can I say that one more time? Equal opportunity without equal preparation means nothing. And equal preparation is not possible where there isn’t equal access to excellence in instruction.

Some years ago, a story was told about a couple of boys that were fishing at a creek, and they saw a body floating downstream. They jumped in, pulled the body out, and gave him mouth-to-mouth and realized he needed more help. They put him on their shoulders and carried him a half hour to a hospital and saved him. As the story goes, a couple of weeks later they were fishing at the same spot and saw another body floating. They pulled that body out, gave mouth-to-mouth, and carried him on their shoulders to a hospital. It

starting happening with startling regularity. So the city fathers suggested building a hospital right at that very spot to avoid transporting of the bodies. And as the story goes, the hospital grew and grew, its bureaucracy got bigger and bigger, and one intern, after serving his time, asked to see the hospital administrator. The intern told him that he learned so much but wanted to know something: “Has anyone gone upstream to find out why the bodies keep falling in the river in the first place?”

Well, we at the Dream Academy go upstream. We’ve found what you have found—that attachment plus achievement plus attendance equals dreams coming true. For young males, it is essential that they form healthy male attachments. It is important that they see healthy models of successful males who inspire them to believe in their dreams, because there is power in a dream.

I was born to a troubled home, and I used to get away from my parents’ troubles by riding a red tricycle. I used to go in the back of my house and turn the tricycle on its side, and I would use one of the backside wheels as a steering wheel and would sit there for hours and dream. I would dream that I was flying and driving to far away places in the world and meeting important people when I was 4 and 5 years old.

When we moved to Montreal, Canada, from palm trees to ice, my father used to take us to the airport to say goodbye to people, and before leaving the airport, I would turn around to see if anyone was looking and would stuff luggage tags in my pocket. At home,

I would get out a pencil and print my name, “Wintley Phipps, flight 676, Paris”— just dreams.

I want you to know a child with a dream is a child with a future. There is nowhere in the world I ever wanted to go that I couldn’t go, no one I ever wanted to meet I couldn’t meet.

One day, I learned that some of the greatest things happen when you treat others with respect, when you don’t know who they are or where they’re going. One day, I was singing in Baltimore, and a young lady came up to me and said “Sir, I just heard you sing and I’m really discouraged.” She was about to be fired from her job. “I just feel like I can talk to you, do you have time to talk to me?” I said sure, and she came by our home and we prayed together. One day after praying with her, I told her that God was going to bless her and give her an opportunity to speak with millions of people. And it was Oprah Winfrey. That’s how we met 23 to 24 years ago. Treat people with respect when you don’t know who they are or where they’re going.

Some years ago, I read a book called *The Resilient Self*. The premise of the book is that children who come through difficult life circumstances develop ways of being resilient. They develop ways of coping with their difficulties. And as they mature, those resiliencies blossom into ways of compensating kids for their troubles. The child who grows up in an alcoholic parents’ home, without realizing, learns how to sense danger early. That’s the child that has finely tuned antennae. That’s the child that can tell when

the mood is about to change. That's the child that can look at you and have your number. As that child grows, he grows this gift that blossoms into an uncanny ability to read people. They went through seven resiliencies, one of which was creativity. That's why a lot of artists and poets come out of very dark circumstances. They develop ways of being resilient. And as they grow and mature, these resiliencies blossom into gifts.

One of the resiliencies that they came across was the child who strays. When a child is truant, a child often is straying from pain. That's the child who wants to get away in what the old days would be a tree house. There are no tree houses in the ghetto. So they stray. Truancy is straying from pain. It is straying from pain. It is staying away from pain. You keep handing me papers with red marks as pain. You keep handing me papers that say I am not achieving and I'm not doing well. That's pain. It's interesting, these psychologists show that that's the child that often has resiliencies that blossom into a strange independence. That's the child that doesn't have to be around you. That's the child that doesn't have to come back to the family reunions. They develop unusual independence.

Every day you can help children connect with their dreams. It was the poet Jonathan Swift that said that vision is the art of seeing invisible things. One day, Michelangelo saw an owner throwing away a block of marble and said, "Don't throw it away, give it to me—there is an angel imprisoned in it." "Vision," Churchill said, "is when you can look farther than you can see." Albert Einstein said that "when it comes to success, imagination is more important than knowledge."

I want to share with you before I leave you some practical things. The U.S. Dream Academy brings tutoring and mentoring after school to children falling behind in school, and here's why: we've found that almost 70 percent of children that end up in prison come from those in prison now. And so we focus a strategy: tutoring, mentoring, and also showing them models of what a family is. Children who go on to be successful usually, we don't know why, seem to build successful lives on the foundation of a vision and of a family. I can't explain—all I know is that when we talk to prisoners, they tell us that they wish that for their children. They don't want their broken circumstance for their children. They tell us they would like their children to have a loving mom and a caring dad and a healthy relationship.

I want to share with you what I call getting practical on what can be done to help children. This may be debatable whether or not truancy is a result, a failure to achieve mastery in education, or whether the failure of mastery in education produces truancy. I will tell you this: In Florida, where I live, I went back after the hurricane and saw a road that had been washed away. Nobody could understand it. I walked up and investigated and saw what happened. They had poured concrete on sand. And then they poured the asphalt on top of the concrete. When the waves came, all it had to do was take out the sand and the whole road crumbled. Let me tell you something: one of the leading indicators of truancy is the lack of achievement and success in the mastery of critical school skills. Successful students do not predominate in the ranks of truant children. How many of you know that? But let me tell you what we're doing with our children in education. We're pouring concrete on sand.

We came up with a concept, and I would like to encourage the Justice and Education Departments to help the Dream Academy with a vision I have that I believe will impact positively in the serious problem of truancy. I'm a realist who dreams. And I know there are no panaceas, no magic bullets, but there are some things that we can do. One of them I call "IPI"—Individualized Prescriptive Instruction. Did you know that when a child gets a bad grade, it is never accompanied with resources to help them fix what they didn't understand? It is a diagnosis without a prescription. And in the medical world that's malpractice. In educating our children, it is the only area, almost of life, where you get a diagnosis without a prescription to fix the problem. You take your car to a mechanic and he'll tell you what's wrong, the diagnosis, and what will he give you? A prescription. You go the doctor and you'll get the same thing—but not in educating our children. I am proposing that we put together resources that are available online, so whenever a child does not understand a particular learning objective, the teacher has a resource to send the child to for remediation, so we don't end up pouring concrete on sand. Because if you do that, the road will crumble. I would be happy to meet with those of you who would like to hear more about this perspective.

Lastly, I leave you with this, why I work so hard with children, because you never know who you're going to touch. I want to read you something to share some words from one of Dr. Martin Luther King's speeches, and I want you to listen carefully. Dr. King said,

We cannot have an enlightened democracy with one great group living in ignorance. We cannot have a healthy nation with one-tenth of the people ill-nourished, sick, harboring germs of disease which recognize no color lines—obey no Jim Crow laws. We cannot have a nation orderly and sound with one group so ground down and thwarted that it is almost

forced into unsocial attitudes and crime. We cannot be truly Christian people so long as we flaunt the central teachings of Jesus: brotherly love and the Golden Rule. We cannot come to full prosperity with one great group so ill-delayed that it cannot buy goods. So as we gird ourselves to defend democracy from foreign attack, let us see to it that increasingly at home we give fair play and free opportunity for all people.

The spirit of Lincoln still lives; that spirit born of the teachings of the Nazarene, who promised mercy to the merciful, who lifted the lowly, strengthened the weak, ate with publicans, and made the captives free. In the light of this divine example, the doctrines of demagogues shiver in their chaff. Already closer understanding links Saxon and Freedman in mutual sympathy.

America experiences a new birth of freedom in her sons and daughters; she incarnates the spirit of her martyred chief. Their loyalty is repledged; their devotion renewed to the work He left unfinished. My heart throbs anew in the hope that inspired by the example of Lincoln, imbued with the spirit of Christ, they will cast down the last barrier to perfect freedom. And I with my brother of blackest hue possessing at last my rightful heritage and holding my head erect, may stand beside the Saxon—a Negro—and yet a man!

The reason I keep this portion of this speech with me at all times is because that amazing speech was written and delivered by Dr. King in April of 1944, when Dr. King was only 15 years old. You'd never know.

I'm going to ask my friend on the sound system to put on the second track that I gave him today. I've been doing this work and, apparently, it has been an inspiration for many, and it inspired this United States Senator to write a song. I want you to run that, my friend.

And I'm going to leave you with this song.

